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ABSTRACT

Conditions of language and literacy are considered by a Texas educator and presented at a 1982 hearing held by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. It is noted that a 1979 policy at the University of Texas system established a freshman-level remedial English course for credit. At the University of Texas, San Antonio, this course is designed as a composition course with a maximum of 20 students per class. The University also offers critical reading and writing as one course. It is suggested that in the United States, lower-division English offerings are being revised to emphasize the following: composing rather than editing; writing for various audiences; teaching the process of inquiry rather than only the research paper form; teaching writing through the writing workshop rather than through the lecture hall approach; and helping students create through writing what they think. The Texas approach to criterion-referenced testing in writing is also described. The test includes a writing sample that is scored holistically and a section in which spelling and other language skills are assessed through objective tests. It is suggested that preservice and inservice programs should educate/reeducate elementary and secondary teachers to teach writing in conjunction with the other language arts. (SW)

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# TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Hearings on Language and Literacy

Houston, Texas

April 1982

Dr. Eileen T. Lundy

The University of Texas at San Antonio

HE 016 809

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Members of the Commission, fellow panelists, members of the audience in attendance at this hearing:

I consider this opportunity to offer my insights on the conditions of language and literacy in our society both a privilege and a pleasure. I have listened to Drs. Anderson, Smith-Trika and Graves and have been stirred both by their remarks and by the unity and consistency of theme that is forming in this hearing. My contribution complements theirs: we are in the midst of a reorientation of educational effort in language teaching and learning, moving on from an overriding concentration on the language product to a concern for learning and teaching the process of producing effective communication.

Perhaps I can clarify this general message by describing what I have observed from the vantage points of two positions. The first is my position as Director of the Composition Program at the University of Texas at San Antonio. The second is my membership on the first Advisory Committee on Writing organized in response to Texas Senate Bill #350 that mandated state-wide testing in writing in Texas.

First the university scene.

In 1979, a policy reversal in the University of Texas system occured. Until that time no state monies were used for what were called remedial courses at the college level. Dr. James Kinneavy and several colleagues representing professors throughout the system convinced members of the Coordinating Board to reinterpret the standing policy. As a result, credit-hour generating courses in basic English now exist on college campuses throughout the state and are helping incoming freshmen make a firmer start on their college careers and increasing the numbers of students who complete the baccularеate degree.

At the University of Texas at San Antonio, we immediately set up our Basic English course. Traditionally such a course would have consisted primarily of grammar reviews. We knew from the compilation of results of studies over more than 75 years of research that such courses return little for the substantial amounts of time and energy expended by both students and instructors. Following the best of what we could cull from the growing body of studies in rhetoric and composition, we designed our Basic English course as a composition course. What we have is a writing workshop in which students and instructors work together in all phases of the writing process, not merely with the editing stage.

We know that in the reading process, what the reader brings to the printed page is at least as important to comprehension as what is printed on the page. Writing has a similar corollary. What the students bring to the writing task from their own experiences must inform the choices made in writing. The challenge of the Basic English course is not to teach students to mimic acceptable forms. The challenge is to help them to find their own voices in writing, to see writing as a way to discover what they think as well as to report ideas, and to experiment with the adaptation of the writing process to varying aims and audiences. In other words, the Basic English course lays the foundation for a continuing emphasis on writing as a communication process and as a way to discover and design thinking.

The Basic English course begins a series of courses that stress the writing process. These courses include freshman composition and the two subsequent courses. In UTSA's early years in the mid seventies (UTSA was formed in 1973), freshman composition was followed by two successive humanities courses. Students sat in lecture halls in classes of as many as

150, listening to lectures on the classics, reading and attempting to read great literature, and taking short-answer, "objective" tests. Obviously, this scheme, in spite of the quality of instruction and the beauty of the literature, could not, by its design, allow instructors or students to address themselves to some students' inabilities to read critically and write clearly and effectively.

The first major change that had to be made was to reduce class size. In spite of the expense involved, this has been accomplished, opening the way for subsequent changes. With a maximum of 20 students per class in Basic English and 25 to 30 in the other courses, instructors are able to confer frequently with individual students. These conferences help students develop their ideas for writing and help them organize their ideas more effectively. Most importantly, instructors can guide individual students in draft after draft as the students refine in their own minds what they are saying and couch it so that it more effectively communicates to the desired audience. This process of drafting, reviewing, rewriting, refining, and rewriting under the guidance of the instructor offers students one of the oldest and most effective ways to become good writers.

The second major change we made was to redo the two humanities courses. They have become Critical Reading and Writing I and II. We hope to engage students in the reading of great works, but we must do more than merely assign the readings. We must, with the assistance of complementary assignments in writing, establish a frame of reference in their own experience so that they are prepared to read critically the work at hand. This is much more than developing word recognition and vocabulary. This includes the exercise of the imagination in visualizing scenes, characters, dialogue and in "seeing" the shape of an argument. It includes recognizing and being

able to produce patterns of logic, of narration, of classification, etc. Critical reading can be served well by writing. Therefore, we keep them together, not losing the great literature but extending it beyond fiction to include readings from various disciplines; not using writing only to test recall or understanding, but to develop the modes of thinking that form the basis of literature, philosophy, science, art, politics, etc.

The regular freshman composition class that follows Basic English and precedes the Critical Reading and Writing courses maintains relatively traditional writing assignments. Forming the basis for the course, however, are the emphasis on the writing process and the primacy of aim and audience as the primary influences upon choices to be made among the modes of organization in writing, in diction, in length and style and tone.

The program I have just described is not unique. College professors and instructors across the country are beginning to revise their programs. We can see a number of changes taking place in courses in lower division sequences in English departments. We seem to be in a transition period, moving from an emphasis on editing to an emphasis on composing; from concern with the product-only to concern with learning an effective process of composing; from teaching one form (usually the five paragraph theme) to teaching students to write for various audiences and for a number of purposes; from teaching the research paper form to teaching the process of inquiry and the effective communication of the results of that process; from the view of writing errors as "bad" to a view of writing errors as clues to follow in designing effective instruction; from the lecture hall approach in teaching composition to the writing workshop.

The movement is strong across the nation. English departments in most

colleges and universities find themselves in the midst of a rennaissance of rhetorical studies. Student response is gratifying. But problems exist. As in any significant change, a degree of resistance is predictable. However, the nature of some of the resistance is quite interesting. Our century began with what has been called "The Modern Revolution," a time when, for a little while, we human beings felt powerful, able to meet all challenges with the help of machines, to solve all mysteries with science. This adolescent delight has matured as we have grown into a kind of adulthood, living now with the results of our scientific and technological creations. We are not as certain, not as sure of our place at the controls. New knowledge has brought us a world not of neat design but of paradoxes and contradictions and ambiquity. Is there a set meaning out there merely to be uncovered, or with the stuff of the universe, are we composing meaning as we go?

I hesitate to use the word "philosophy" for fear it will too easily be dismissed as unimportant in the practical sphere. But my observations of teachers and professors in high school and college English departments lead me to the conclusion that the basic resistance in many instances expresses basic, unarticulated, philosophical differences in what it means to know, in what it means, then, to teach and learn about language, in what it means to teach and learn how to read and write.

One position holds that what we know, what we come to know through reading and writing is "out there." It is "objective." We strain to grasp it, to see it more clearly and then to report on it. The other position holds that writing, for example, involves a process of making meaning, not merely of reporting it.

When we see writing as reporting meaning, then, of course, all we have to do is follow rules, mimic set forms. Instructors can say: "Here is what

a persuasive paper looks like. Here is the form. Now, you do one." The student tries. The instructor replies, "Yes, you did it," or, "No, that is not it. Try again." Or, if there is not time to try again, "Sorry, F."

We are moving then, in a direction in writing instruction whereby students create what they think; they make meaning. We must, then, work with them throughout the process, asking questions that will help them think through what they are finding they have to say. "What do you think about what you just wrote?" "Are you satisfied with this?" Often, these students will respond, as Donald Murray's work beautifully relates, by pointing out far better than we could the problem places in their papers.

And now to the recommendations. Across the nation, English departments are struggling with the reorientation of introductory classes. The struggle rises from the philosophical transitions in progress as well as from the literacy levels of students. I wish to offer to the commission the following receommendations:

1) to continue financial support for inservice programs that have proven effective in preparing high school teachers to teach writing well. The most successful series of programs of this kind is the Bay Area Writing Project in locations throughout the United States.

2) to support like programs for college faculty, preferably for college faculty across the curriculum as well as for faculty of departments of English.

3) to support efforts to inform and educate administrators in secondary and higher education so that they will better understand and, consequently, more firmly support programs in language and literacy that are rooted in sound theory and research.

4) to support research efforts in the design of effective programs in Basic Englush at the college level so that greater numbers of our students will be able to continue successfully through college.

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I shall turn now to the second vantage point from which I have watched the literacy scene: the Advisory Committee on Writing for the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills.

In June, 1979, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill #350 which mandated yearly criterion-referenced tests for all students in grades 3, 5 and 9 in reading, mathematics and writing. Such tests were not uncommon in reading and math, but a state-level "criterion-referenced" test in writing presented a new challenge. Dr. Donna Townsend, Director of English and Language Arts at the Texas Education Agency, assembled an advisory committee composed of classroom teachers, language arts supervisors, and college professors. It became clear early in our first meeting that the philosophical split described earlier in this presentation divided this committee also. Added to this, we were working without a precedent. Examinations comprised of multiple choice, fill-in-blanks, or other testing forms popularly termed "objective tests" were available. The difficulty with these tests lay in the fact that they simply did not - and do not - test composing, that is, the ability to write effectively to a given audience for a particular purpose. No such tests existed. Dr. Townsend, with the able help of her assistant, Dr. Carol Greenhalgh, and the advisory committee worked with national testing services to design a test that would include a writing sample to be scored holistically and a section in which spelling, punctuation, etc., would be

tested in objective tests. The writing sample counted 80% in the score, the latter section 20%.

Dr. Townsend, Dr. Greenhalgh and a series of testing agencies developed a scoring process called focused holistic evaluation. Over 750,000 student papers constitute the work to be evaluated each year. Trained readers judge the papers periodically renewing their understanding and application of the criteria for evaluating the writing. The expenditures of time, energy and monies have been great; the benefits even greater. Perhaps the greatest benefit of all has been the reinstitution of writing in elementary and secondary curricula in the state of Texas. Because of the 80% emphasis on the writing sample and because of the additional emphasis on compositional factors rather than editing factors in the writing sample, even teachers and administrators who might be inclined to "teach for the test" find they need a writing curriculum that places a healthy emphasis on the writing process.

The only testing programs that approach the magnitude of the TABS writing examinations might be the New York Regents Examinations and the College English Entrance Board placement exams. The pursuit of quality and the adherence to sound educational principles in the testing and scoring procedures used with the quarter of a million student papers annually marks a triumph of concern and integrity in the teaching and learning of composition.

School districts throughout the state have organized inservice programs to bring help to elementary and secondary teachers of English and Language Arts whose preservice course work offered little or no preparation in the teaching of writing. Because of certification programs and school curricula

that lift reading out of its place among the interacting language arts, the preparation of reading teachers has overemphasized reading in isolation and has at times distorted the description of the nature of the reading process and the process of learning to read. The TABS tests in writing, by causing writing to reenter the curriculum, have added energy to Texas' place in the current movements to see reading and writing, speaking, listening and viewing as interactive language arts.

As a result of the TABS writing tests, each year over 750,000 pieces of valuable data roll into the archives of the Texas Education Agency. The developmental view of students responses to particular writing assignments buried in that data could serve to enlighten teachers, professors and researchers who need to know more to better educate our students. As soon as the Texas Education Agency can release that material, a team of researchers should set to work to describe the developmental patterns that must be there.

Let me clarify something at this point. I would not like my remarks to be construed as strong support for state testing programs. The legislature passed Senate Bill #350 without fully realizing the implications of the law. Given the necessity for state-level testing in writing, the writing sample component and the scoring process constitute the triumph and the contribution. There have been problems, of course: the process can use refinement; better and smoother administrational procedures can and should evolve. But the law remains; the tests will continue. Their worth will continue as long as they remain tests of composing and not merely of editing skills and usage.

All of this produces a need similar to that of higher education: the need to re-educate teachers to teach writing.

The following recommendations flow from this section of my testimony:

- support preservice curricula and inservice programs that educate or reeducate elementary and secondary teachers to teach writing in conjuction with the other language arts.
- provide support for research into the data gathered yearly through the writing samples in the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills. Such research might yield answers to the following questions:
  - What have the designers of the writing sample tests learned about effective writing assignments for students in grades three, five, and nine?
  - What specific variations occur in the writing samples from varying socio-economic groups?
  - What developmental patterns emerge in response to the writing assignments and how do these patterns compare with the results of other research studies?

In conclusion, I return to my opening observation that the testimony thus far attests to strong and consistent trends in research related to language and literacy. These trends have established this time of development as an "age of process." John Dewey taught us that we learn by doing. Frank Smith and his colleagues in reading research tell us we learn to read by reading. Every writer knows that we learn to write by writing and re-writing and re-writing. The process teaches and we learn in the process.

Short answers, multiple choice and fill-in-the-blanks can neither

adequately teach nor test the composition. Offering the appearance of objectivity and ease in administration, such procedures may share some responsibility for declining literacy levels among our students. Subjectivity is not an evil. The subjects - the students - must carry their experience and knowledge to the reading and writing process for communication to occur. Thus, our students will discover what they think, create their knowledge, make meaning in their lives.

"Pentimento" is that phenomenon in oil paintings when earlier lines covered over by later layers of paint begin to show through. Lillian Hellmann used this term to title a collection of autobiographical insights. In the book she sees again past events that show through in the present as meaningful, as related to who she now is. Acquiring knowledge is more than a process of adding facts to a collection. Becoming knowledgeable means seeing again what we already knew in the light of the new. It means making meaning with the past and the present. The process by which we learn teaches us what it means to know. We must educate ourselves to lead our students in a process of acquiring knowledge that will enable them to see and see again and again, and again, making meaning in their lives as they learn.

which enhances learning in other subject areas

2. Increased cultural and social awareness and knowledge

3. Enhanced political facility built upon appropriate foreign language use

4. The economic viability in dealing with our neighbors around the world who do not share the English language